

When the two seas met: preventive and self-managed relocation of the Nova Enseada community in Brazil

Giovanna Gini, Tatiana Mendonça Cardoso and Erika Pires Ramos

A collaboration between community members and researchers examines how a traditional coastal community in Brazil overcame environmental and legal challenges to manage their own relocation.

The Ilha do Cardoso, in the state of São Paulo on the south-east coast of Brazil, is home to the Enseada da Baleia community. As Caiçara people, their livelihoods depend on the particular characteristics of where they live, and include itinerant agriculture, artisanal fishing, extractivism, sustainable tourism and crafts activities. Enseada is located between two worlds – the sea and the estuary; this physical location is both part of their traditional identity and a contributor to the community's socio-environmental vulnerability over the years.

The island has long been affected by erosion caused by the destructive force of an ever more unpredictable sea; moreover, its designation in 1962 as a State conservation reserve led to the expulsion

of many Caiçara communities and makes it difficult for those who remain to maintain a sustainable way of life. After several years, the combination of these forces destroyed the place where Enseada was, splitting the island in two and forcing a relocation.

Decision to relocate

"We need to start again. Our family is a big tree and needs to go to a new place and plant its roots."
Malaquias Cardoso¹

According to Enseada members, the effects of erosion began to become critical in the 1990s, prompting them to construct a sea wall. In 2008, the State Prosecutor launched an investigation into the situation and in 2013 the Forestry Foundation – which



Carol Mendonça

manages the reserve – set up a working group to monitor the area. At the request of the community, the State Public Defender began participating in meetings of the working group to ensure that the right to remain on the island was respected, in light of discussions being held about potential relocation. However, these first early attempts to organise relocation bore no fruit.

Between 2015 and 2016 the erosion process accelerated as a result of strong and frequent tidal surges, reducing the strip of sand that separates the estuary from the open sea from 22 to 12 metres. In October 2016, a very strong tidal undertow reduced the strip to a width of two metres, and it was this situation that urged the community to begin the process of relocation. The total rupture of the strip would leave the community submerged in a matter of hours. Leaving was the only option. The big question was how to summon up the courage to leave their only known home, and much negotiation and consultation within the community were needed to reach agreement.

The criteria for choosing a new area on the island for relocation were security

(from a geographical point of view) and the possibility of maintaining traditional activities and generating sustainable income. At the request of the community, the new location's viability was corroborated in a study by a group of researchers.² The personal link with the land was what finally determined its identification: inhabited in the past by the former matriarch who assured the community that it had all essential resources – drinking water, fruit trees and fishing places.

Difficulties

State and municipal authorities offered two solutions to Enseada members: integration into another community on the island or transfer to the periphery of the nearest city. Both options were rejected by the community, since these would fundamentally change their relationships (within the community and with other communities), their lifestyle, their traditions, and their system of socio-political organisation. Since 2010, the community has been organised according to a system of economic and political feminism based on principles of solidarity, which has been key in the relocation process.

The authorisation for self-organised relocation only came after a difficult process, involving the intervention of the Public Defender's Office, the Prosecutor's Office and the State Secretary of the Environment. Negotiating relocation within a conservation area, especially in a national political environment that questions the rights of traditional communities, is extremely tricky. It was necessary to bring together the different entities involved, obtain the support of public bodies and elicit the support of wider society in order to ensure a constructive dialogue with the Park's management bodies. All this engagement was undertaken by the women of Enseada, who had organised themselves as the Association of Residents of Enseada da Baleia (AMEB, from the Portuguese).

"People who work don't get tired because everything is for the common good." Jorge Cardoso

Despite receiving authorisation, there was no State financial assistance – an obstacle that was overcome by the community by

June 2020

www.fmreview.org/Issue64

drawing on their creativity, solidarity, traditions, and a lot of work. AMEB arranged the division of the area of land for houses, establishing a pyramid of priority where the most vulnerable were placed first. Any improvements to the original house structures had to be negotiated with the administrators of the park, since they were not allowed to exceed the original number of square metres of each house being rebuilt in the new location.

Strategies

To achieve their objectives, the community instituted *mutirões* – a system of collective mobilisation to achieve a common goal, based on free, mutual help. These involved the participation of the extended community (tourists, friends and family from other regions and countries). Through such community networks, they raised funds to cover the cost of construction activities and materials and organised the transport of the materials.

“Without resources, the test of our resolve begins: you have to buy and transport the materials needed ... all predominantly through using the mutirões system of mobilisation.” Tatiana Cardoso

Throughout the process, the entire community worked every day to rebuild their homes – construction work that prevented them from pursuing any income-generating activities. Women worked the land, cooked for the community, and soothed the children who missed their hammocks in the trees. The health of many people deteriorated because of the physical and emotional effort required.

The elderly had long been living in fear of relocation but for the younger people it was a time of renewal and the opportunity to seek and use new sources of knowledge. This attracted young people from the community who had emigrated to cities in search of work. The community saw their work as an example of resistance, where traditions combine with the ability to reinvent skills. The community took up residence in the new location, called Nova Enseada, in June 2017. When the force of the sea finally broke through the strip of sand in August

2018, destroying much of the community’s material past, the community had by then successfully created a new beginning.

New challenges

“I’m very sad to leave here, but we are forced to by danger.” Erci Malaquias (former matriarch)

The effects of the climate crisis are continuing to change the dynamics of fishing, water salinity, and the island’s vegetation. Other communities that live on the island are also experiencing changes, and a new era is beginning – that of dialogue between the communities in an attempt to understand what is happening. By continuing the work that has been started, and in the spirit of solidarity that has been built through this long and difficult process of relocation, the islanders are hopeful of devising ways to protect their community before a new crisis arises. They currently plan to continue defending their territory, especially from speculation from the private sector and from a State-backed proposal to privatise the management of the island that threaten the integrity of the territory, life and permanence of the Caiçara communities on Cardoso Island.

What have we learned?

“Each community has its way of working, its way of living.” Antonio Mario Mendonça

The experience of the Nova Enseada community is a successful case of relocation, enabled by years of empowerment and political awareness. However, it is also a case of climate injustice, given their abandonment by the State. Despite greater global awareness around the need for recognition and protection of those affected by the impacts of climate change, many local communities remain invisible for several reasons. In the case of Enseada we identify the following reasons:

Legal invisibility: The lack of normative and institutional governance for these contexts meant a series of ad hoc strategies had to be devised by the community. This



Carol Mendonça

legal invisibility increases community vulnerability and precariousness – exacerbated by emotional and economic stress and by the conflicts between the different parties who are either directly or indirectly involved (neighbouring communities, park management and local authorities).

Political invisibility: The strategy of self-identification as a traditional Caiçara population experiencing vulnerability in the face of the forces of nature was essential to their fight to stay in the territory and ensure that their identity, culture and rights were respected by the State. Traditional wisdom combined with academic and scientific studies resulted in the harmonisation of different knowledge systems to facilitate effective and fairer relocation. The use of *mutirões* demonstrated that community-based solutions are less intrusive and more efficient than strategies based on a top-down approach. And from these practices emerged an inter-community capacity to cope with

shared risks and obstacles. However, the lack of political response by the State to the frequent storms and the relentless erosion that forced the relocation demonstrates a disconnect between the narrative in international arenas and local realities.

Emotional invisibility: The local authorities gave no consideration to the emotional impacts involved. Members of the Enseada community knew it was crucial not to lose heart during the relocation process and for everyone to feel included in the decision-making process; they also recognised that the relocation process would not be complete until they not only had rebuilt the same physical structures as before but had also learned to understand and adapt to the changing environment and to construct memories linking them to the new place.

"I go with my broken heart ... it was here that we created ourselves." Débora Mendonça

Giovanna Gini g.a.gini@qmul.ac.uk

PhD student, Department of Geography, Queen Mary University, London www.qmul.ac.uk

Tatiana Mendonça Cardoso
enseadadabaleia@gmail.com

Student of Social Sciences, Caiçara resident of the Enseada da Baleia Community and member of the Group of Artisan Women of the Enseada da Baleia (MAE), Ilha do Cardoso, Brazil

Erika Pires Ramos [contato.resama@gmail.com](mailto:resama@gmail.com)

PhD in International Law at University of Sao Paulo; Founder/researcher, South American Network for Environmental Migrations (RESAMA) <https://resama.net>

1. All the quotations are from members of the community, and are taken from the following audiovisual recordings: *Tomorrow has come* <http://oamanhaehoje.com.br/eng/>; *Vazantes* <https://curtadoc.tv/curta/cultura-popular/vazantes/>; *Alta da maré expulsa pescadores de vila centenária* www.youtube.com/watch?v=NrRdQ-8EDs4; *Ajude a Nova Enseada! Ilha do Cardoso* www.youtube.com/watch?v=qu1b5AhfWic&feature=youtu.be

2. Based at NUPAUB, a research centre at the University of São Paulo. NUPAUB-USP (2016) 'Informe de evaluación técnica del área de reasentamiento de la comunidad de Enseada da Baleia bajo los aspectos de seguridad antropológica, ambiental y geológica frente al proceso de erosión en la Isla de Cardoso', Cananéia-SP, Processo Administrativo de Tutela Coletiva No. 07/15/PATC/CDR/DPVR/UR